

A Brief History of the Organizing for Mission (OFM) Cohort

The Organizing for Mission Cohort began as an experiment of the ELCA in July of 2010. At the end of the twice-annual Mission Developer Training event in Minneapolis, Director for Congregation-based Organizing Rev. Susan Engh drew together mission developers she knew to be **using the tools and principles of organizing** in strategic ways to build and sustain their ministries.

Believing that these leaders could benefit from knowing and learning from one another, Engh convened a gathering of **12 leaders from 6 different ministries** at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, for a three-day event. Local organizers and practitioners provided **training modules on mission-applicable organizing tools** and a key emphasis was placed on **relationship building** between the various developers and the **establishment of a culture of mutual accountability.**

At the conclusion of the first event, participants expressed a desire to meet again within six to eight months, to continue building their relationships and accountability and to discover whether and how this burgeoning cohort might attract new members and become an influential force in the ELCA. Thus began a **pattern of meeting twice annually.**

Over time, a **core of mission developers** has been **joined by those actively renewing existing congregations,** along with a cadre of those in **specialized ministry, seminarians, and ELCA teaching theologians.** The thread that ties all of these people and ministries together remains: *utilizing the tools and principles of community organizing as a key approach to “doing church.”*

Leadership development and “ownership of the movement” are high priorities of the cohort. So each gathering is planned and led by a different small group of leaders, with the hosting ministry taking a lead role in determining the tenor and priorities of the gathering. An emphasis on the contextual application of organizing principles in the host site is a highlight of each gathering, even as participants are challenged to look at and adjust their own ministry contexts considering what they learn from the host site.

As we began meeting at our member congregations, and spent time learning how the holy spirit was moving with a people in a particular place, the identity of the cohort began to coalesce around a distinct set of lenses to guide our work – the integration of spiritual practice, a focus on place-based accountability, and a commitment to racial and economic equity. Into the third year of its existence, the Cohort began inviting **accompanying theologians** to come alongside its journey. Ray Pickett and Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, of PLTS, and Victor Thasaiah, of CLU, now consider themselves full members of the OFM Cohort.

In the Spring of 2018, Cohort leaders were **invited by PLTS to conduct a five-day training in community organizing.** This was the first iteration of a new course that will be offered annually at the seminary, and will be required for all students starting in 2019. Seven students attended, joined by an additional 40 participants from various ministry settings. The training sessions were conducted by a mix of guest network trainers and Cohort practitioners.

That 5 day training sparked the cohort’s collective imagination for what a scale up in our network could look like. The decision was made to grow and become ecumenical. The 5 day training has now become the integral training in our arc of transformation, which also includes two contextual gatherings.

Organizing for Mission Cohort Timeline, locations and numbers

1. July, 2010 St. Paul MN
2. February, 2011 Orlando FL
3. September, 2011 Detroit MI
4. March, 2012 Portland OR
5. October, 2012 Chicago IL
6. May, 2013 Washington, D.C. Luther Place Memorial Church
7. October, 2013 Riverdale IL Shekinah Chapel
8. June, 2014 Detroit MI Grace in Action Church & Collectives
9. March, 2015 Everett WA Trinity Lutheran College
10. November, 2015 Minneapolis MN Redeemer Lutheran Church
11. September, 2016 Portland OR Leaven Community / Salt & Light Lutheran
12. March, 2017 Baltimore MD Amazing Grace Lutheran Church
13. September, 2017 Clinton IA St. Pual Lutheran Church
14. May, 2018 Berkeley CA Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary
(Cohort gathering combined with 5-day training)
15. October, 2018 Riverdale IL Shekinah Chapel